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ABSTRACT

Discussed are instructional content and approaches in early childhood education. A literature review presents a definition of instructional content and covers a diversity of opinions and approaches to the education of children in preschool and kindergarten. Presented in a general comments section is the author's definition of instructional content, and described are three major types of approaches to the education of yound children; self-instruction, social-psychological, and direct instruction. (IM)

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OSSC BULLETIN

EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTRUCTION: A SUMMARY OF APPROACHES

by

George Sheperd

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FOREWORD

This Bulletin discusses instructional content and approaches in early childhood education. Little effort is made to "defend" any one curriculum or method of teaching for K-level education, since it is usually a matter for each local district to explore more freely than with the higher grade levels. However, generally speaking, "early childhood instruction" is and has been an area of concern. The material presented in this Bulletin is intended to help identify some of the problems and to offer some possible directions and resources for those interested in early childhood education.

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Kenneth A. Erickson
Executive Secretary
Oregon School Study Council

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EARLY CHILDHOOD INSTRUCTION: A SUMMARY OF APPROACHES

Introduction

Much of the present-day educational literature documents the importance and the necessity of establishing educational programs for children prior to first grade. This importance seems particularly true with what might be considered culturally disadvantaged or handicapped children. The National Educational Association has stated:

> Research shows clearly that the first four to five years of a child's life is the period of most rapid growth in physical and mental characteristics and greatest susceptibility to environmental influence. Consequently, it is in the early years that deprivations are most dangerous in their effects . . . experience indicates that exposure to a wide variety of activities in social and mental interactions with children and adults greatly enhances a child's ability to learn. Few homes provide enough of these opportunities . . . the need is for a complement, not an alternative, to family life.

Such comments appear frequently in the literature. It is also common practice to use such terms as "wide variety of activities" without offering positive suggestions as to what these activities should be. In other words, specific instructional content appears to be more difficult to suggest than the concept that such instructional content is needed.

One of the problems that seems apparent is defining the term "instructional content." As Mager (1968) has suggested, a teacher lectures, tutors, or otherwise assists a student to learn because he/she hopes that the child can: " . . . know more than he knew before; understand something that he did not understand before; develop a skill that was not developed before; feel differently about a subject than he felt before; or develop an appreciation for something where there was none before. . . . No teaching goal can be reached unless the student is influenced to become different in some way than he was before the instruction was taken."

As Mager suggests, we use many descriptors when we discuss the "what" of instruction. One of the first tasks of dealing with early childhood education is, therefore, in defining exactly what is meant by "instructional content." At a later point, a definition will be presented which, if not generally agreed upon, will at least serve as a discussion point and a basis for future investigation.

Review of Literature

The following should in no way be considered a comprehensive survey and/or presentation of the existing literature which pertains to the area of instructional content in early childhood education. Only enough material is presented to indicate the diversity of opinions that exist

and the several approaches that are now being used.

Evelyn Pitcher (1966) in her book Helping Young Children to Learn states that through the child's own activity and discovery, she desires to foster development of curiosity, problem solving skills, the ability to question thoughtfully, and the ability to think for him/herself. She further states that to join effectively in the educational process, the pre-school child must be equipped with basic information, abilities and attitudes. He must:

1) continue development of communication skills;

2) begin to symbolize ideas into pictures and signs;

3) encounter variety to draw concepts from;

4) develop the power of sensory discrimination;

5) learn that the world is a realm of regularities in which he can have confidence;

6) begin to shape abstract concepts.

Further, it appears that Pitcher believes the content of the program involves activities in:

1) discrimination in classification;

2) preliminary reading and writing; and

3) preliminary mathematics and geometry.

Wann (1960) has taken exception to the fact that nursery schools and kindergartens have usually been more concerned with developing emotional stability and skills in social adjustment than with contributing intellectual content

to children's experiences. He takes the position that teaching methods in early childhood settings must support and extend the abilities to think, to reason and to conceptualize. These, Wann believes, are the essential skills that children must learn.

Ayers (1969) takes a similar position. He believes that educational stimulation does not endorse waiting but requires, instead, a well-designed plan by which the child is led carefully and comfortably through a series of structured activities aimed at developing the characteristics necessary to perform specific skills as early as possible. "Cognitive learning is the major instructional emphasis," he states. He also believes that science is the major curriculum area, since program developers believe that science is "an essential study for youngsters, whose world has virtually been created by science."

Karnes, Hodgins and Teska (1970) have described the first year results of a study designed to evaluate the effectiveness of two different pre-school programs. One program provided the traditional nursery school experience which attempted in conventional ways to improve the personal, social and motor development of the children. The other program was "experimental" and provided a structured agenda focused on specific learning tasks chosen from school-related curricula. These tasks were divided into

three curricular areas: social studies/science; mathematical concepts; language arts and reading readiness. Briefly stated, the goals of the three areas were:

Social Studies and Science

1. Teach useful vocabulary.
2. Develop skills of classification.
3. Supply simple experiences in developing sensory discrimination.
4. Provide basic observation of natural phenomena.

Mathematics

1. Develop basic number concepts.
2. Develop appropriate manipulative skills.
3. Develop useful vocabulary.

Language and Reading

1. Develop fine visual and auditory discrimination.
2. Develop visual motor coordination.
3. Develop skill in memory and sequential activities.
4. Learn how to handle a book in associated skills.
5. Create new language responses.

According to Karnes, Hodgins, and Teska, the experimental program proved to be significantly more effective in promoting intellectual functioning, language abilities, perceptual development and school readiness as measured by selected tests.

Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) believe that young

children from culturally disadvantaged environments lack those particular kinds of learning that are important for success in school. They point out that if these children are to "catch up" they must progress at a faster than normal rate. They further state that "A well rounded program is, therefore, incompatible with the goal of catching up," and that selectivity is necessary. They have pinpointed specific skills which have been established as objectives. Programs in language and mathematics have been developed. Examples of specific skills to be learned are:

1) ability to use both affirmative and negative statements;

2) ability to use both affirmative and negative statements in response to the command, "Tell me about this."

3) ability to handle polar opposites;

4) ability to count objects correctly up to ten, etc.

Other professionals have taken a different point of view as to what the "instructional content" should be in the education of young children. Hymes (1968) has stated that the kind of person we want in our society is one who is a rugged individualist, uses his head, has a heart, is free, and has a healthy self-concept. To Hymes, this means that the child becomes a person--alive, with a full feeling of self-awareness and self-direction. He further states that what children come to school to learn is "selfhood." The school must teach in all the areas of subject matter; but

the scope and sequence approach to curriculum is not well-suited to programs for young children. There are significant learning situations wherever the children turn, and their specific interests are more important than the logical order. The author feels that the natural happenings in the child's environment constitute the content. The teacher should choose those "happenings" that are rich in potential learnings. At a later age, the child can put what he has learned in logical order in his mind.

Sponberg (1969) takes a similar position based on the idea that "children are always changing . . . they stress the recognition of environments that meet the needs of individual children." Sponberg further states that teachers should "let the children make their choices of activities for the day . . . the only way to get people to accept responsibility for decisions they make is to give them chances to make them."

For Sponberg, much emphasis on evaluation is in children's attitudes. Such evaluation is based upon the following questions:

1. Do children question more?
2. Are children able to express their feelings and interests in an individual way?
3. Do children transfer concepts acquired in working with mathematics into science and social studies experiences?

It is apparent from the above brief presentation of

the literature that there is no agreement as to what the instructional content of early childhood education should be, and, more importantly, that very little specificity is presented. Therefore, it appears that much effort must be given to documenting "what" the education of young children should be for the best results.

General Comments and Definition

For discussion purposes, the following definition is presented for consideration:

> Instructional content in early childhood education is defined as the skills, attitudes and units of information necessary in order for a child to successfully exist in his environment.
>
> --A skill is performance ability.
>
> --An attitude is a state of mind that influences performance.
>
> --A unit of information is a single fact or concept which exists independent of the child.
>
> --Successfully exist is determined by each individual child's capacity or ability.
>
> --Environment would include all factors affecting the child at any given time.

It is realized that any suggested definition becomes debatable. For example, one might question the desirability

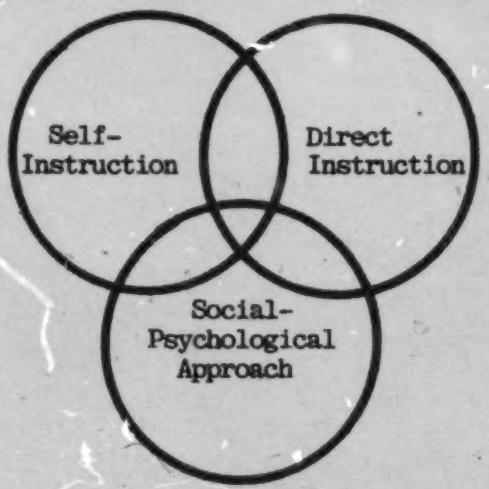
of including in the definition, "necessary in order for a child to successfully exist in his environment." The inclusion of such a phrase is meant to indicate that, with the young child, it is necessary to establish a hierarchy of priorities and that those of us who intervene with young children must use our energies to assure the assimilation of those skills, attitudes, and units of information which are essential to the development of the child. If an item of instructional content can be defended as necessary in order for the child to successfully exist in his environment, then that item becomes more universally acceptable. If such an item cannot be defended on this basis, then it becomes debatable, and very little is accomplished.

One might also question whether or not skills, attitudes and units of information fully cover all which should be included in a definition of instructional content in early childhood education. Open for debate are the sub-definitions of these terms. However, each deserves discussion itself and, in fact, each suggests many areas in need of research.

Assuming the acceptance of a definition, the next step seems to be to state specifically the skills, attitudes and units of information that are necessary for very young children. However, one of the major obstacles that arises is the fact that one cannot divorce instructional content from

instructional methodology, instructional philosophy, or "approaches."

The following diagram depicts what the author sees as the three major types of approaches which are currently in practice with the young child:



The <u>self-instruction approach</u> would be exemplified by the philosophy of Hymes (1968), who has stated that the child's "interest is more important than the logical order. The happenings around the child is the content, and the teacher should choose those with richness and potential learnings." The approach is also exemplified by Ruth Ann Sponberg (1969), who states that teachers should "let the children make their choices of activities for the day." In essence, what this approach implies is that the "what" of instructional content is dependent upon the child himself. Basically, it depends upon what his particular interests are at any given time.

The social-psychological approach displays major interest in such things as attitudes, self-concept, and behaviors. The work of Gans, Stendler, and Almy (Teaching Young Children, 1952) has taken the position that there is a disparity between the "three R's" approach and a realistic view of the needs and interests of young children. They have cited the highly transient and incidental nature of the "interests and needs" approach, and take the position that the social-psychological approach is best suited as a curriculum design.

Although there are several proponents of the direct instruction method, this philosophy is probably best described in the work of Siegfried Engelmann. Engelmann says that some of the main premises underlying direct instruction are:

1) if a child does not know something, the only assumption that we can make as educators is that he has not been taught;

2) the further behind a child is in school, the more efficiently and effectively he must be taught if he is going to catch up;

3) since the amount of time for teaching the children is limited, we must focus upon specific skills or objectives in order to teach a child efficiently and effectively;

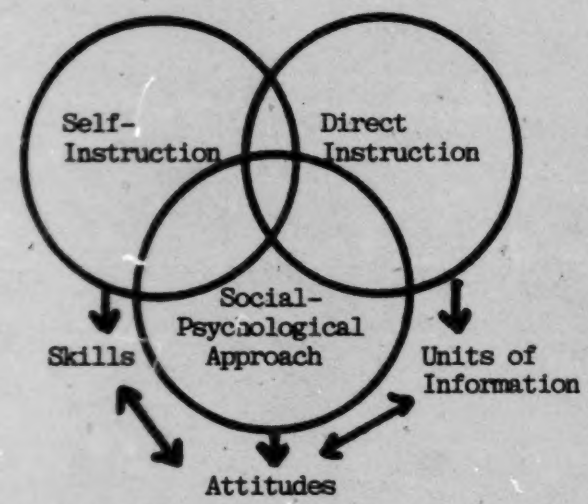
4) instruction is directed by the task components, not the psychological status of the students.

In regard to these differences in philosophical approaches, Elkind (1969) has stated:

> What is shaping up is a battle between the traditional middle-class nursery school teachers who see preschool education as development from within and the new breed of preschool worker who sees education as enforcement from without. The issues on

which they differ are readiness, pressure, self-expression and creativity. The traditional orientation sees readiness as development from within; the instruction orientation sees it as a matter of environmental preparation; the enrichment position is that academic pressure adds further burdensome pressures upon the child; whereas, the instructional position holds that we are underestimating the child's ability to learn, and are placing a negative value on learning; the traditional nursery school fosters self-expression, creativity, while the instructional school says to channel it.

As presented in the diagram, it is not suggested that each approach stand alone as a separate entity. Rather, each is a matter of emphasis, and can work together harmoniously in the development of skills, attitudes, and the attaining of knowledge or "information."



Once again, not suggesting that instructional content in early childhood education is an "all-or-nothing" situation but that it is, rather, a matter of emphasis, it can be seen that each approach might be more concerned with a certain <u>type</u> of instructional content. The <u>social-psychological approach</u> is primarily concerned with developing

appropriate attitudes in the child with the belief that, given these attitudes, a child will be more receptive to the learning tasks which he will face at a later point in time. The self-instruction approach, although also interested in attitudes, is primarily interested in a child's developing certain skills which are necessary for the assimilation of "knowledge." The direct instruction approach would place heavy emphasis on units of information, believing that through the act of applying specific knowledge, skills and attitudes would also be developed.

In conclusion, the foregoing discussion is presented to show that instructional content in early childhood education cannot be treated as an entity unto itself, but must, instead, be treated as an integral piece of a total puzzle completely dependent upon all other pieces in forming the complete picture portraying the education of a young child.

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